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Selling green militarization: The discursive (re)production of militarized conservation in the Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Abstract

In recent years, the militarization of nature conservation has intensified, especially in protected areas located in conflict zones or plagued by ‘poaching crises’. Such ‘green militarization’ is enabled by a range of discursive techniques that allow it to be seen as a ‘normal’ and ‘legitimate’ response. This article analyzes these techniques in relation to the Virunga National Park, located in the war-ridden east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where militarized approaches to conservation have a long lineage. It demonstrates that many of the discursive techniques that are currently at play show strong continuities with the past. These include moral boundary-drawing grounded in colonial tropes that accomplish the (racial) Othering of poachers and rebels, and the long-established practice of invoking states of emergency as part of wider mechanisms of securitization. However, the rise of neoliberal conservation, with its emphasis on marketing and marketization, has induced transformations in the employed discursive techniques. Notably, it has intensified the spectacularization of militarized conservation and anchored it in everyday consumer practices, by actively inviting individual supporters to directly fund militarized interventions, thus generating ‘militarization by consumption’. This shows that ‘green militarization’ is not only driven by the growing commodification of nature conservation, but is increasingly subject to commodification itself.

1. Introduction

The movie *Virunga* (2014), which portrays an endangered World Heritage Site located in the conflict-ridden eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, drew widespread media attention and acclaim, including an Oscar nomination. Juxtaposing spectacular imagery of African ‘pristine wilderness’ with warscape vistas featuring heavily armed park guards and rebel soldiers, the movie is engineered to shock-and-awe the spectator. Moreover, its simple but suspenseful storylines featuring clearly identifiable heroes, villains and victims generate a satisfying viewer experience, portraying an ‘epic battle’ for a ‘good cause’. Consequently, the portrayed militarization of conservation elicits little explicit reflection, appearing like a ‘taken for granted’ and ‘natural’ feature of conservation in a war zone. In this article, we argue that the movie *Virunga* is emblematic of a set of discursive techniques that normalize and legitimize the militarization of conservation. Our analysis therefore contributes to the emerging literature on ‘green militarization’ defined by [Lunstrum \(2014: 817\)](#) as “the use of military and paramilitary (military-like) actors, techniques,

technologies, and partnerships in the pursuit of conservation”.

Drawing on the existing literature on the discursive dimensions of green militarization, we analyze discursive techniques from the colonial encounter to the present, highlighting both continuities and discontinuities. Like in the colonial past, militarized responses to conservation in Virunga are normalized and justified by moral boundary-drawing through the deployment of colonial and racial tropes leading to the Othering of poachers and rebels (Neumann, 2004), while naturalizing control over military matters as white privilege. Furthermore, militarized interventions continue to be construed as ‘necessary’ by the invocation of states of emergency, which is a crucial element of mechanisms of securitization (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2011; Ybarra, 2012). However, there have also been shifts in the discursive techniques that contribute to the (re)production of the militarization of the Virunga National Park. We ascribe these shifts to the rise of what has been called ‘neoliberal conservation’ (Brockington et al., 2008; Igoe and Brockington, 2007), in particular its reliance on spectacle and marketization.

Neoliberal conservation has intensified the spectacularization of militarized conservation, for instance through the intrusive multimedia diffusion of images of heavily armed park guards as ‘real heroes’. Furthermore, it has fostered the marketization of militarization by actively inviting individual supporters to directly fund militarized conservation practices, or what we call ‘militarization by consumption’. By generating self-referential narratives and imagery that are difficult to ground truth and penetrate by counter-voices, especially those of the inhabitants of the Virunga area, these techniques obscure the counterproductive effects of militarized conservation. This allows for encapsulating ‘stabilization’ as another ‘win’ in the seductive ‘multiple win’ rhetoric that is a hallmark of neoliberal conservation (Igoe and Brockington, 2007).

Our analysis does not intend to discuss the (in)adequacies of militarized responses to conservation and armed group activity in the Virunga park per se. This would require an elaborate discussion of the drivers of conflict, armed mobilization and illegal resources exploitation in the area, which we have already presented elsewhere (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2016). Rather, we focus on the discursive techniques that render green militarization a taken for granted and justified approach. To identify these techniques and their effects, we studied discourses and imagery of the Virunga park between 2013 and 2016, analyzing news articles, websites, documentaries, movies and the social media, including the communications of the park and the movie Virunga. Additionally, we analyzed policy documents and other communications of organizations and aid donors involved in conservation and ‘development’ projects in the Virunga area. All documents, news articles and screenshots of websites were submitted to a database. Furthermore, as part of wider research projects, in total eight months of fieldwork were conducted in various parts of the Virunga area between 2010 and 2015, in the course of which interviews were held with park management and rangers, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), local authorities and different groups of inhabitants.

The article is structured as follows. We start with discussing the intersection of two ongoing theoretical debates within the field of political ecology: first, the debate on the legitimization and normalization of green militarization; and second, that on the rise of neoliberal conservation. Subsequently, we analyze the discursive techniques promoting militarized conservation practice in Virunga, starting with those having a long lineage, and then discussing what we identify as more recent trends. Next, we examine how the adverse effects of green militarization remain hidden,

notably by excluding the voices of the population through differential access to power and technology, and how such concealment influences policymaking. We conclude by arguing that the increasing commodification of green militarization is not limited to the context of Virunga, but can also be detected in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, driving and being driven by the growing securitization of nature conservation and the recycling of often racialized colonial tropes.

2. The discursive (re)production of green militarization in the era of neoliberal conservation

The militarization of nature conservation is propelled by entwined discursive and material processes: military actors and instruments are only deployed to ‘save nature’ when this is seen as a ‘normal’, ‘rational’ and ‘legitimate’ response. Such normalization and legitimization is a result of particular ‘discursive techniques’, defined herein as recurring configurations of narratives imagery and discursive practices that frame social phenomena, thereby authorizing and privileging certain forms of knowledge, actors and modes of action while delegitimizing and obscuring others (cf. [Snow et al., 1986](#)). For instance, the discursive technique of ‘securitization’, or the framing of social phenomena as ‘security issues’, renders security experts and measures appropriate actors and modes of action to address the ‘threat’ at hand ([Buzan et al., 1998](#)). Another discursive technique is (the discursive dimension of processes of) ‘marketization’, understood herein as presenting market-based instruments and related forms of commodification as ‘desirable’ and ‘adequate solutions’ to regulating socioeconomic life (cf. [Peck, 2004](#)). As they become part of publicity and marketing, and are anchored in everyday consumer practices, the narratives productive of marketization and commodification become ‘normalized’, thereby contributing to transforming social relationships, identities and worldviews. As argued by [Massey \(2013: 11\)](#), vocabularies of consumerism mould “both our conception of ourselves and our understanding of and relationship to the world”. Such discursive practice, she contends, is “crucial to the formation of the ideological scaffolding of the hegemonic common sense” ([Massey, 2013: 9](#)). In the case of green militarization, as further showed below, marketization works for instance by inviting consumers to directly fund militarized conservation practices, and by presenting such contributions as an effective way to win ‘the war for biodiversity’ (cf. [Duffy, 2016](#)).

While driven by human agency, the discursive processes by which green militarization is normalized and legitimized are not necessarily the product of conscious and intentional strategies, as the language of ‘techniques’ might suggest. Although the Virunga park’s marketing and communications strategies are carefully designed, and media reporting on the park often deliberately paints a positive image, this does not imply they are consciously engineered towards legitimizing and normalizing militarized interventions. Rather, those producing such discourses and imagery, often with the explicit intention to mobilize support and funds for the park, draw on existing tropes and narratives and representations of conservation as currently practiced. Through complex interaction effects and “frame resonance” ([Snow et al., 1986:477](#)), or the ways certain narratives and images strike a chord among audiences, for instance as they correspond to engrained worldviews and everyday experiences ([Snow and Benford, 1988](#)), the employed discursive techniques affect the ways militarized conservation is seen and evaluated.

Just as green militarization in Sub-Saharan Africa is not a new phenomenon,

dating back to the colonial era (Mackenzie, 1988; Neumann, 1998), the discursive techniques allowing it to appear as taken for granted and justified have a long lineage. As analyzed by Neumann (1998), the creation of protected areas (PAs) by the colonial powers was informed by a particular set of discourses, consisting of a blend of stereotypical views of African culture and nature-society relations. Combined with an unfaltering belief in white superiority (Wolmer, 2001), these ideas legitimized the violent imposition of radically different regimes of land ownership and use (Brooks, 2005; Igoe, 2004). One of the ways in which the concomitant racial hierarchization legitimized violent interventions was through moral distancing, in particular via the invocation of tropes of barbarianism. This allowed for portraying violence as part of a 'civilizing mission' bringing order and productivity to what were conceived of as places of lawlessness and 'primitivism' (Adams, 2003; Neumann, 1998; Van Schuylenbergh, 2009).

In the postcolonial era, conservation-related violence continues to be authorized by (moral) boundary-drawing as informed by colonial and often racial scripts, reflecting the power asymmetries that mark the relations of production and control underlying the appropriation of African wildlife value (Büscher, 2011; Garland, 2008; Singh and van Houtum, 2002). In his seminal article on the normalization of the use of violence in African national parks, Neumann argues that "the discursive practices deployed in the war for biodiversity recycle and engage notions of African otherness" (2004: 822). Such recycling is in part propelled by certain narratives on the causes of violent conflict and the illicit exploitation of natural resources, attributing these to either 'greed' or 'scarcity'. These 'explanations' often have Neomalthusian or 'Neobarbarian' (cf. Richards, 1996) undertones, thereby accomplishing the criminalization and Othering of rebels and poachers, which lowers the moral threshold for the use of violence (Neumann, 2004; Ybarra, 2012).

The 'taming' of 'barbarians' and dissenters becomes all the more urgent (and legitimate) when there are 'emergencies' that threaten the life and power of the dominant moral community, therefore requiring exceptional measures like the temporary suspension of 'normal' moral codes. From the colonial era onwards, invoking emergencies has been framed in the language of security, leading to the securitization of conservation issues (Mackenzie, 1988; Neumann, 1998). In recent years, this discursive technique has become increasingly prominent, in part because it is driven by logics of capital accumulation that play a growing role in militarized nature conservation (Dunlap and Fairhead, 2014; Massé and Lunstrum, 2016). An important vector of recent securitization is the spread of narratives portraying wildlife crime as a crucial source of funding for insurgent and 'terrorist' groups (Duffy, 2016; White, 2014). Such narratives sometimes merge with discourses on sovereignty and 'national security' (Lunstrum, 2014), or those framing resource-driven or enabled armed violence as a 'global security issue' (Duffy, 2014). These perceived security threats do not only justify militarized interventions, but may also legitimize external involvement in such interventions, for example by sending in foreign military personnel as 'trainers' and 'experts' (Duffy, 2016; Lombard, 2016). In such cases, securitization starts to overlap with discursive techniques relating to moral boundary-drawing as informed by colonially scripted hierarchies, which often have a racial dimension. This highlights how the ways in which conservation gets entangled with securitization lead to the reproduction of "economic and racial privileges" (Kelly and Ybarra, 2016: 171).

While securitization and racialized moral boundary-drawing have

accompanied green militarization in Sub-Saharan Africa from the colonial past onwards, what is relatively ‘new’ is the ways these narratives are spread and link up with other discursive techniques such as marketization and spectacularization, as driven by the growing prominence of market-based income generation and multi-media marketing strategies in conservation practice (Büscher, 2016a, 2016b; Lunstrum, 2016). These features are a hallmark of what is referred to as ‘neoliberal conservation’ (Igoe and Brockington, 2007), relating to the changing nature of conservation practice over the last two decades or so, marked by a convergence of philanthropic, NGO, aid donor, corporate and media interests (Brockington et al., 2008). Within the literature (Arsel and Büscher, 2012; Brockington and Duffy, 2010; Brockington et al., 2008; Büscher, 2013; Büscher et al., 2014; Igoe, 2010; Igoe and Brockington, 2007), neoliberal conservation is broadly characterized by (1) a strong orientation towards market-based income generation and private actors and funding (also involving marketization as a discursive technique); (2) profound depoliticization of conservation issues, including by decontextualization and the obscuring of power relations (for instance, between Western conservation NGOs and local governments and populations in non-Western contexts); (3) consensus building among the main (Western) actors involved, in particular by invoking ‘multiple win’ rhetoric (like claims that PAs contribute to both conservation and ‘development’); and (4) a crucial role for ‘spectacle’, or the visual mediation of social and human-environmental relationships (Igoe, 2010), as diffused via media productions that are often part of ‘360 degrees marketing’, which involves coordinated publicity strategies that diffuse simplified narratives linking commodity brands to ‘good causes’ through a variety of outlets. As we demonstrate in the following, these four characteristics of neoliberal conservation have profoundly affected the ways in which green militarization is discursively (re)produced.

A particularly important effect of the rise of neoliberal conservation is the emergence of green militarization as a form of ‘conservation spectacle’. For Igoe (2010), drawing on Debord (1967) and Tsing (2005), conservation spectacle generates a self-referential universe based on a dialogical process between images of wildlife and wilderness landscapes and the representations that informed their production. These spectacular visual mediations, which are often engineered to communicate ‘conservation success’ and mobilize consumers, are only indirectly connected to the places they represent, characterized as they are by “‘a double act of fetishization” (Igoe, 2010: 389): Not only is the history and context of the featured phenomena obscured, thereby fetishizing the presented relationships, the relationships that enabled this concealment in the first place are also rendered invisible. In this manner, spectacular productions “‘become their own evidence, continuously referring back to themselves in affirmation of the realness of the world(s) that they show their viewers” (Igoe, 2010).

An important driver of ‘conservation spectacle’ is the growing convergence of biodiversity conservation and capitalism (Brockington et al., 2008; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2014; Sullivan, 2013). The virtual worlds and benefits produced by spectacle are not only crucial for the publicity and marketing that enable charitable consumption and donations (Igoe et al., 2010; Schuetze, 2015), they are an increasingly important source of revenue themselves, being used for the production of enter-and infotainment, like features of National Geographic Channel or Animal Planet. As they are diffused through a wide range of media, like billboards, glossy magazines, web productions and movies, often in an intrusive manner, the ‘world-making projects’ of such conservation spectacle deeply penetrate into consumers’

everyday lives (Brockington et al., 2008; Igoe, 2010). This contributes to the normalization of the diffused narratives and imagery, causing them to shape consumers' grids of intelligibility, which enhances their interweaving with 'lived reality' (Igoe, 2010; Massey, 2013).

As we show in relation to the Virunga National Park, militarized nature conservation is 'spectacularized' through the production of consumable images of warscapes, heroic (white) military trainers and (African) armed park guards figuring as 'martyrs' in a 'green crusade' (Vivanco, 2002: 1899). The resulting militarized world-making projects enable what we call 'militarization by consumption', whereby consumers are invited to directly finance components of militarized conservation efforts, like (paramilitary) rangers' equipment and uniforms or man-trailing bloodhound teams. By exposing consumers to images of militarized conservation, and by rendering them complicit with such conservation, 'militarization by consumption' contributes to the normalization of green militarization.

Table 1

The discursive techniques (re)producing militarized approaches to conservation in the Virunga National Park.

Discursive technique	Description	How it contributes to green militarization	Examples relating to conservation
Securitization	Framing social phenomena (like conservation issues) as 'security matters'	Authorizes (militarized) interventions by security experts to address purported security threats	Duffy (2016), Peluso and Vandergeest (2011)
Moral boundary-drawing	Moral distancing by creating Us/Them divides	Legitimizes violence against the (often racialized) Other	Neumann (2004), Ybarra (2012)
Spectacularization	Visual mediations conjuring virtual worlds	Conceals negative dimensions and effects of green militarization through 'double-fetishization' and decontextualization	Igoe (2010), Igoe et al. (2010)
Marketization	Presenting market-based instruments and consumption as desirable and 'adequate solutions'	Normalizes green militarization by anchoring it in everyday consumer practice	Brockington et al. (2008), Büscher (2013)
Multiple-win rhetoric	Portraying certain courses of action as generating multiple (often virtual) advantages at once	Presents 'stabilization' (in addition to 'development') as another 'currency of conservation spectacle'	Igoe and Brockington (2007), Büscher (2013)

Exploring the normalizing and legitimizing effects of virtual worlds, our contribution complements recent research by [Lunstrum \(2016\)](#) and [Büscher \(2016a, 2016b\)](#), who study the interplay between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ conservation violence, focusing on inflammatory rhetoric against poachers in online forums. As [Lunstrum \(2016: 2\)](#) argues: “This violence, however, is not neatly contained within an online world. Rather, it comes to matter by authorizing a militarized approach to commercial poaching.” Furthermore, similar to [Büscher \(2013, 2016b\)](#), we show that the newer discursive techniques on which this militarized worldmaking draws do not displace, but are strongly grounded in and amplify older ones, notably racially scripted moral boundary-drawing and securitization. In sum, by building on and connecting the literatures on the discursive dimensions of green militarization and neoliberal conservation, we intend to provide a comprehensive explanation for the ways in which militarized approaches to conservation in Virunga are normalized and legitimized, identifying five key discursive techniques that accomplish these processes (see [Table 1](#)). In the following, we further elaborate on these techniques, starting with those that can be traced back to the colonial era.

3. Securitization and moral boundary-drawing from the colonial past to the ‘colonial present’

Founded as the Albert National Park in 1925, named after the then King of Belgium Albert I, what is now the Virunga National Park encompassed at first only the living area of its flagship species, the mountain gorilla. In the 1930s, the park’s territory was vastly extended, which coincided with proclaiming a state of emergency in relation to sleeping sickness. This allowed the colonial administration to frame the large-scale displacement of the population as ‘bringing them in safety’. While areas that were not yet affected by sleeping sickness were evacuated with force, partly by the colonial army, communities suffering from the disease were first isolated, and after being cured, expelled from their land without any compensation ([Nzabandora, 2011](#)). Since the park management followed a ‘fortress conservation’ model ([Ward, 1997](#); [Brockington, 2002](#)), which is based on the assumption that human presence and activity are damaging to ecosystems, the park became inaccessible to most of its former users ([Nzabandora, 2006, 2011](#); [Vikanza, 2011](#)).

After the Congo’s independence in 1960, Belgian conservationists remained closely involved. In 1969, Jacques Verschuren, the last Belgian conservator before independence, was appointed director of the state conservation agency by then President Mobutu. He applauded Mobutu’s initial strict approach to conservation, including the “‘quasi dictatorial power” given to the new park management ([Verschuren and Mankoto Ma Mbaelele, 2006: 87](#)). This translated into a continuation of militarized approaches, as visible in the practices of the park guards, who were given blanket permission to use armed force against poachers ([Verschuren and Mankoto Ma Mbaelele, 2006: 87](#)), forming one of the first ‘shoot on sight’ policies in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Throughout the postcolonial era, external aid, in particular of the European Commission (EC), was crucial for the park’s functioning. From 1994 onwards, this continuing external involvement was legitimized through the ‘state of emergency’ that was declared after the park was engulfed by a massive wave of Rwandan Hutu refugees and combatants arriving in the wake of the Rwandan genocide. Their presence, which had highly detrimental effects on both the environment and security ([Biswas and Tortajada- Quiros, 1996](#)), would eventually spark a military intervention

by a Rwanda-led regional insurgent coalition, ushering in the First (1996–1997) and then the Second Congo War (1998–2003). While the main belligerents of the Second Congo War signed a peace accord in 2003, armed mobilization has continued in large parts of the eastern Congo, including in the Virunga area.

Reflecting past patterns, the ongoing crisis situation in the park continues to legitimize far-reaching external involvement. In particular the EC's Directorate General for International Cooperation and Development (DEVCO), which finances 80% of the operating costs of the park, plays an important role. Resuming involvement in 2005, DEVCO channeled funds to the African Conservation Fund (ACF), an off-spin of Richard Leakey's Wildlife Direct directed by the Belgian national Emmanuel de Merode, which subsequently established a Public Private Partnership (PPP) with the Congolese government to manage the park. Together with a financial contribution of the Frankfurt Zoological Society and USAID, the EC funds, while earmarked for development, were partly invested in special forces training of Virunga's park rangers by a private security company named Salama Fikira ([Frankfurt Zoological Society, 2006](#)). This illustrates how 'state of emergency' discourses contribute to 'consensus-building' on militarized interventions among a range of diverse public and private actors.

However, external and militarized interventions also continue to be legitimized by colonially scripted images of the Congo as 'the Heart of Darkness', a place of backwardness and irrationality that needs to be 'civilized' ([Dunn, 2003](#); [Koddenbrock, 2012](#)). According to [Dunn \(2003: 5\)](#), "many Western observers in the twenty-first century still conceptualize events in the Congo by employing colonial images and hundred-year old racial stereotypes and by privileging Western definitions of state, sovereignty, and security". A good example of how such imagery shapes conservation practices are the events of 2007, when seven mountain gorillas were killed. Allegedly, this occurred at the instigation of the then director of the Virunga park, who thereby tried to protect his interests in the charcoal business ([Jenkins, 2008](#)). The gorilla killings were widely mediatized, including by the photographer Brent Stirton who won a World Press Photo award with his shocking images of the murdered mammals. This mediatization, which helped generate an intense lobby for bigger external involvement in the park by UNESCO and the World Conservation Union, strongly drew on stereotypes of the Congo as a 'backward' place with a dysfunctional and corrupt government. For instance, one article in *National Geographic* dramatically described the park as a "vortex of human misery", a "blood-pooled battlefield" and a "Hieronymus Bosch painting come alive", to conclude that: "Without a guaranteed budget, Congo's national parks are deeply susceptible to corruption and exploitation" ([Jenkins, 2008](#)). Although not explicitly stated, the implications are clear: external financing and management of the park by benign 'Western' actors are the only way to 'save' it.

The mounting pressure for external intervention was successful: the compromised park director was removed, and a year later, Emmanuel de Merode was appointed as chief warden of the park. Soon after, a new PPP was signed that delegated the responsibility for the entire management of the park to ACF, which later changed its name to the Virunga Foundation ([Hatchwell, 2014](#)). Thus, the park was once again largely managed by Westerners, who partly justified their interventions by appealing to a state of emergency. These included militarized interventions: after taking over, the new park management strongly stepped up strict law enforcement to tackle illegal natural resources exploitation by both civilians and armed groups ([Kujirakwinja et al., 2010](#)). A key part of this strategy was further reform of the park

guard service, with a new wave of recruits receiving training from ex-Belgian military personnel. Moreover, in certain parts of the park, guards now operate in mixed battalions with the Congolese army, to deter the multiple armed groups that are present in the park. However, as we conclude elsewhere (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2016), this approach has largely been counterproductive. It has exacerbated park-population and other conflicts, worsened insecurity and reinforced armed mobilization (cf. Duffy et al., 2015; Lunstrum, 2014). Despite these negative consequences, the followed approach is rarely called into question by those funding the park and ‘development’ initiatives in the area, such as the EC, bilateral donors and conservation NGOs, or in media reporting and online forums discussing the park.

One of the ways in which the current militarized approach appears legitimate is by highlighting the state of war and chaos in the park, which would render militarized interventions a ‘self-evidentiary necessity’. Moreover, depictions of war are often imbued with colonial tropes of barbarism and African Otherness that dehumanize and criminalize armed groups and poachers, thereby justifying the use of violence. Such violence appears even more legitimate when it is managed and controlled by white/Western ‘experts’. As pointed out by Garland (2008: 58), it is always (white) Westerners “who claim the status of privileged interpreters and advocates for the African environment”. We argue that this also applies to the domain of green militarization, as whites/Westerners are considered to be privileged interpreters of the security situation in many African PAs, having superior knowledge of and skills in security matters. By extension, force becomes legitimate when whites/Westerners control and order (but not necessarily execute) it. Drawing on Büscher and Ramutsindela (2016), we label this phenomenon ‘white-authorized green violence’. The 2006 documentary *Guns for Hire*, which showcases the efforts of former British Special Forces Lt. Colonel Conrad Thorpe to militarily train Virunga’s rangers, powerfully illustrates the dynamics of ‘white-authorized green violence’. The documentary’s opening sets the tone: This is the story of one British soldier who takes on a mission impossible to face crazed militias and a corrupt army, hold the mass extermination of wildlife and create a Garden of Eden out of the ashes of conflict (...) Can a hired gun save Africa’s wildlife?¹

Not only does the documentary emphasize Thorpe’s superiority towards his Congolese subordinates, it contains several scenes showing that when people are found within the borders of the park or express resistance, they are quickly labeled as ‘rebels’, justifying a violent response. Such justifications are further reinforced by constant references to the moral rottenness of the Congolese, or in Thorpe’s words: “everything you touch here is tainted”. In this manner, strong moral boundaries are drawn between on the one hand, the “neocolonial figure of the adventurous and self-sacrificing white Westerner” (Vivanco, 2002: 1190) and the park guards in need of ‘training’, and on the other hand, criminalized African poachers, ‘crazed militias’ and a ‘corrupt army’, who are all dehumanized. Mainstream media reporting echoes these tropes, which contributes to the legitimization of white-ordered violence against black poachers and rebels. For instance, in an article on the park entitled *Of Blood and Magma* (Baron, 2012), we read that “evil flows through this beautiful land, horror distilled from genocide and war, from tyranny, greed, poverty and hate, destroying nature, destroying people”. Later, “the otherworldly and blood-soaked Virunga” is described as “crawling with militias either operating or protecting networks of

¹ Documentary *Guns for Hire*-Congo (2006):

<http://old.vonplantaproductions.com/filmography/documentary/guns-for-hire-congo-drc/> (last accessed 16 February 2015).

poaching, illegal tree-cutting and fishing, all while robbing, raping and killing at will” (Baron, 2012). Yet, the darker the background, the brighter the savior. As the article continues: “in a region infamous for brutal conflicts, a bright spot is spreading. Virunga warden Emmanuel de Merode (. . .) is asserting control over broad swathes of the park. Against the armed groups, de Merode has arrayed his new, slimmed-down, trained-up ranger army” (Baron, 2012). Again, it is a white person, in this case the park’s chief warden and commander-in-chief of the guards, who deploys and regulates force, thus assuring white audiences of its legitimacy. As we will discuss in the following, the vibrancy of such colonial imagery and tropes, justifying the invocation of Gregory’s (2004) notion of “the colonial present”, is in part a result of marketing strategies and media productions anchored in the spectacularization of green militarization.

4. Spectacularization and marketization: green militarization as ‘consumer experience’

In recent years, there has been a substantial output of media productions, including documentaries and movies, featuring Virunga not only as a pristine landscape, but also a spectacular and dangerous warscape. This is epitomized by the motto of the movie Virunga: “conservation is war”,² confirming Neumann’s (2004: 813) observation that war has become “a common model and metaphor for conceptualizing and planning biodiversity protection in Africa”. The entertainment industry and media have importantly contributed to popularizing such representations, a trend that intensified in the late 1980s with movies like *Rhino War* (1987) (Vivanco, 2002). These media productions draw on simple but powerful hero/villain/victim narratives, providing limited and selective information about the targeted ‘bad guys’, the enacted violence and the sociopolitical context in general, thus transforming ‘green wars’ into a prepackaged consumer experience (Vivanco, 2002). The depiction of the rebel group M23 in the movie Virunga is a good example of such decontextualization. The rebels simply burst into the screen, without further explanation, having neither a history nor a future. The subsequent sequence of an artillery barrage seems tailored to ‘shock and awe’ the spectator and draw them into an exciting story, therefore discouraging reflections on the origins, objectives and morality of the portrayed violence. Thus, rather than only raising more questions than they answer, as argued by Vivanco (2002: 1202), spectacular visualizations of green militarization also prevent questions from being asked in the first place.

Another example of decontextualization in the movie, as in the park’s publicity and marketing strategies more generally, is the glorification of the (African) park ranger, clearly cast in the role of ‘good guy’ (and, increasingly, girl).³ Complementing, but ultimately remaining subordinate to, the white commander-in-chief or trainer, the self-sacrificing African guards form the ‘boots on the ground’ in the war for biodiversity. By strongly emphasizing the dangers to which the rangers are exposed, and the tragedy of their occasional loss of life, the park guard emerges as a martyr of conservation. Consequently, the violence employed by the guards is moved beyond the realm of scrutiny—because it is effectuated by a heroic figure, we merely assume that it is necessary and legitimate. What further prevents scrutiny is the invisibility of the population in representations of the guards, who primarily appear in

² See: <http://virungamovie.com> (last accessed 12 February 2015).

³ Through the latest wave of recruitment, 14 women entered the Virunga park ranger service, who now take center stage in much media reporting, see e.g. Hatcher (2015).

spectacular war-fighting or iconic ‘pristine wilderness’ settings, often in the company of the noble wildlife to be saved (whether dead or alive). However, as we observed during fieldwork, ‘correcting’ lawbreaking populations, including by burning down settlements, destroying agricultural tools and fishing nets, and arresting people, is an essential task of the daily ranger job. Moreover, writing the inhabitants out of the scenario allows for concealing the palpable fear for the guards that people in the Virunga area experience, both as a result of historically grown negative images of the guards and contemporary harsh law-enforcement practices (Mwamba, 2014; Vikanza, 2011). In sum, representations of the park guards are highly stylized, highlighting uniquely their courage and self-sacrifice when faced with ‘brutal rebel groups’ or ‘evil poachers’, while downplaying violence towards civilians and the latter’s profound distrust towards and fear for the guards.

These carefully shaped representations of war and park guards are capitalized upon to propel audiences into action, in particular to donate. Thus, the park’s communications combine celebrations of the rangers’ heroism with calls for financial contributions:

These paramilitary park rangers are charged with the defence of Africa’s oldest national park. It’s hard, hot, dangerous and thankless work, but these men are proud and pleased to do it. They see themselves as the custodians not only of their country’s heritage but also of the planet’s greatest treasures. But they’re up against it. Their enemies are more numerous, better armed, and better funded than they are. Poachers are slaughtering Virunga’s animals in very large numbers and huge tracts of her forest have been plundered for fuel. To find out more about this epic struggle and to see how you can help the rangers to win it, please go to <http://www.gorillacd.org>.⁴

This quote shows how through representations of the guards as a (para)military force fighting a ‘just war’, people are actively called upon to donate to the park, to help the rangers ‘win this epic struggle’. Moreover, it exposes how war communicates urgency, and produces heroes (and victims) with whom the consumer can identify, providing a ‘human face’ to green militarization.

The mobilizing potential of the spectacle of green militarization was also seized upon by the movie *Virunga*, which had as its executive producers Leonardo DiCaprio and Howard G. Buffet, the son of multibillionaire Warren Buffet, who runs his own megaphilanthropic outfit. Buffet is also one of the main donors of the ‘Virunga Alliance’, a public-private initiative to promote ‘development’ in the Virunga area via market-based income generation. The movie *Virunga* formed a key pillar of awareness and fundraising efforts for the park and the Alliance, being designed to mobilize a critical global mass to ‘save Virunga’. Moreover a ‘social impact producer’ kept up steady media coverage on the film and park. This person, who also appeared in international media as a ‘spokesperson for the park’ (Clark Howard, 2014), later doubled as one of the directors of the Virunga Foundation and Virunga Productions C.I.C, which delivers media services to the park (Endole, 2016). This indicates how, as acknowledged by people working for the park, what was

⁴ Written text on the YouTube channel of the Virunga National Park. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JDp3XCPBUs> (last accessed 17 February 2016).

presented as an independent ‘documentary’ was in essence a ‘propaganda movie for the park’ (interviews, Goma, June 2015), with the communications strategies of the movie amplifying those of the park.

Indeed, reflecting the emphasis on publicity and marketing that is a hallmark of “NatureTM Inc.” (Arsel and Büscher, 2012; Büscher et al., 2014), the management of the park pursues a multidimensional strategy to push the ‘brand Virunga’. Through an active social media approach, it attempts to create a ‘Virunga global community’ known on social media as #TeamVirunga, which people are invited to join via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (interview, Goma, June 2015). Expectedly, Virunga’s ‘global community’ is consistently asked to donate to the park and circulate crowd-sourcing campaigns for specific conservation projects, making heavy use of celebrities in video messages.⁵ Another part of the branding and fundraising campaign is to tag the logo of the Virunga park to consumer products. In May 2014, Tom’s Shoes launched a Virunga National Park Initiative footwear collection that presents ‘Vegan Earthwise Classics’ with Virunga’s logo featuring “an embroidered version of one of the mountain gorillas we’re fighting to save”.⁶ Furthermore, one can contribute to the park by shopping on Amazon,⁷ giving people the feeling that they can help save Virunga through increased consumption. Additionally, since October 2015 the shop page on the park website offers consumers the possibility to buy an ecological friendly water bottle with the Virunga logo. By purchasing one US \$30 bottle, “we are able to further the park’s commitments through supporting such programs as funding two rangers for a full-day patrol, providing one family of a fallen ranger with two weeks of support, or buying nearly 100 cucumbers for the orphan gorillas!”⁸

By buying products that fund ranger patrols, consumers directly finance Virunga’s militarized approach to conservation, a phenomenon we call ‘militarization by consumption’. Another way in which this mechanism operates is by offering consumers the possibility to fund chunks of militarized conservation practice via donations. In both cases, it is attempted to create a direct (virtual) link between sponsor and project in order to enhance ‘consumer satisfaction’ by giving supporters a concrete idea what is financed with their money. For instance, on the website of the Virunga Foundation, we can read that:

By donating, you will become an integral part of the effort to save one of the Earth’s most special treasures. There are few places where a financial gift can have such a meaningful impact. Here are some examples of what your money can do:

\$8 – A pair of new boots for a ranger.

\$32 – Funds a ranger for one day (includes family health insurance).

\$50 – One month of support for the widow and children of a Fallen Ranger.

⁵ For instance, in a video uploaded on YouTube by the Virunga National Park, actor Paul Wesley asks people to join Team Virunga by donating money, stating that Google will match all donations, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZU6LkWYRnA> (last accessed 2 October 2015).

⁶ See: <https://www.toms.com/stories/tag/virunga-national-park> (last accessed 20 February 2014).

⁷ See: “Shop on Amazon Smile and Virunga benefits”, <https://virunga.org/news/shop-on-amazon-smile-and-virunga-benefits/> (last accessed 2 October 2015).

⁸ See: <https://virunga.org/shop/> (last accessed 16 February 2016).

- \$150 – Two weeks of food and supplements for an orphan gorilla.
- \$300 – One hour of flight time for an anti-poaching patrol.
- \$500 – One day tactical elephant protection operation.
- \$1000 – Comprehensive sweep and removal of deadly snares in the mountain gorilla sector⁹ (emphasis added).

The park website also offers supporters a ‘menu’ of seven projects they can choose to sponsor. Only one of these is to the benefit of inhabitants of the Virunga area, with most others serving to finance the park’s strict fences-and-fines approach, including its militarized aspects. Donors can for example pay for the Elephant Protection Unit, the costs of which are US \$32/per ranger per day; or support anti-poaching deployment through the Gorilla Protection Project. They can also support the Congohounds initiative, a man-trailing program using bloodhounds “to track poachers and other criminals through even the most challenging terrain.”¹⁰ Not surprisingly, we do not learn what occurs to the ‘criminals’ who are traced down by these efforts, nor why they are present and threaten the wildlife in the first place: the self-evident manner in which the selective and stylized facts are presented precludes further reflection and places the proposed interventions beyond moral doubt. The prominent place for white trainers and coaches in images of the bloodhound team further convince the consumer of the legitimacy of the activities-to-be-funded, reflecting how the colonial trope of ‘white-authorized green violence’ also infuses present-day consumer-oriented militarized conservation spectacle.

Similar mechanisms of concealment and obliteration are manifest in the efforts to attract donations for the ‘Fallen Rangers Fund’. At once creating and capitalizing upon rangers’ status as martyrs, the figure of the dead ranger has come to play a key role in fundraising efforts for Virunga. This is evidenced by the park’s communications, which constantly repeat the total number of casualties (at present 150 guards killed in the line of duty during the last two decades). Furthermore, the Virunga National Park has a blog on its website where it reports whenever rangers have been killed, with all blog posts ending with a call for donations.¹¹ Similarly, the park’s newsletter reports each ranger death to its subscribers, messages that always appeal to the reader to financially contribute to the Fallen Rangers Fund. The Virunga movie Twitter account also participates in the fallen ranger publicity campaign, sending messages each time a ranger has died, which equally call for financial contributions. High-profile supporters of the park, like the Virunga movie’s executive producer Leonardo di Caprio, raise further awareness of the plight of the fallen ranger via social media, like via their twitter account (see Fig. 1).

Mainstream media coverage on the park has copied the singular focus on ranger deaths, with every new casualty making it to the headlines. “Shot and killed by unknown assailants, the 32-year-old-ranger became the latest fatality in a conservation effort where one of the most endangered species are the park rangers themselves” reports CNN dramatically (Kowalczyk, 2015). To dramatize rangers’ death, such media reporting often recycles colonially scripted depictions of (African) rebels and poachers as ‘barbaric Others’. For instance, a Washington Post piece entitled ‘Rangers in Congo Risk Lives for Rare Gorillas’, highlights how the Belgian

⁹ See: <https://virunga.org/donate/> (last accessed 15 July 2016).

¹⁰ See: www.congohounds.ch (last accessed 4 March 2015).

¹¹ Virunga National Park, blog post 15 March 2016, see <https://virunga.org/news/remembering-rangers-mulonga-and-mumbere/> (last accessed 11 July 2016).

commando-trained rangers face “vicious militias” involved in “summary executions, rape and forced recruitment of child soldiers” (Manson, 2012). The news media also mimic the direct link with fundraising, referring for instance to the Fallen Rangers Fund within their coverage. For example, a recent National Geographic piece on yet another casualty embeds the words “(Contribute to Virunga’s Fallen Ranger Fund)” with a hyperlink in the text (Clark Howard, 2015).



Fig. 1. Examples of fundraising tweets from the twitter accounts of Leonardo DiCaprio and the movie Virunga.

Whether reported by the media or the park itself, the information that is provided on ranger fatalities is limited. We do not get to know whether others were killed aside from the rangers, or further details of the operations, which often involve the destruction of dwellings, agricultural fields and other civilian infrastructure, and are frequently accompanied by human rights violations (Vikanza, 2011). Rather, green militarization is presented in ready-made packages combining spectacular stories and images with the seeming opportunity to act (by donating), thus becoming the object of consumption. Through such decontextualization, the funding of interventions that involve significant violence is transformed into a satisfying consumer experience, with the instant gratification of donating to a ‘good cause’ pre-empting or subduing further reflection on the funded activities. This transformation is grounded in the “doublefetishization” identified by Igoe (2010: 389): not only is the context shaping the connections between individual donor and (dead) park guard concealed, the relationships that allow for this concealment are also obscured, just as the effects of the connection. This allows for the commodification of green militarization, with spectacular images of warscapes and paramilitary heroes becoming the object of consumption, seducing consumers to directly fund militarized interventions. Hence, similar to what Igoe analyzed in relation to Prince Charles’ rainforest project, such militarized world-making portrays “problems and their causes (. . .) as occurring at distant locations, while solutions resolve around new forms of commodification” (Igoe, 2010:370). While circulating virtual representations, the effects of these discursive constructions are not merely virtual: rather, they fund and authorize certain interventions in the conservation spaces they portray, which have far-reaching consequences ‘on the ground’. In the following, it is discussed how these consequences remain largely invisible.

5. Stabilization as new currency of militarized conservation spectacle

Similar to other research on the effects of green militarization (Duffy et al., 2015; Lunstrum, 2014), there are limited indications that the militarized approach currently pursued in Virunga is effective from the point of view of defusing illegal natural resources exploitation and armed mobilization. By threatening their livelihoods and increasing insecurity, it has further antagonized the inhabitants of the Virunga area, already experiencing to be in conflict with the park due to feelings of having been unjustly expropriated from their lands in the colonial era (Kujirakwinja et al., 2010; Mwamba, 2014; Vikanza, 2011). This antagonism promotes people's tendency to solicit the protection of different armed forces to engage in 'guerilla agriculture' (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2015) and other prohibited livelihood activities in the park, which strengthens these groups. Moreover, in combination with the increasing insecurity, it motivates people to join or support nonstate armed groups. For these various reasons, it seems that the pursued militarized approach fuels, rather than diminishes, armed group activity and conflict dynamics (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2016).

What further alienates the around four million people living in or within a day's walking from the park is that the current approach is developed and implemented from the top down, fostering distrust and causing the population to feel excluded (Kujirakwinja et al., 2010). As one inhabitant commented on the mixed operations between park guards and the Congolese army: "I do not know when this started and finished, there is no information about it, no clarification, so now the population is questioning, as it has no trust in this construction. There is no communication" (Interview, Vitshumbi, June 2014). The 'development' schemes of the Virunga Alliance have similarly been developed with limited consultation. According to an employee of a local environmental NGO:


The Virunga Alliance came for us out of the sky, it was presented to us and we were asked to endorse it. No there is no community conservation in Virunga. They really need to improve their communication with the local population (Interview, Kiwanja, May 2014).

Such feelings of exclusion are exacerbated by the heavy external involvement in the park, which is managed by a Western NGO and park director and supported by Western donors. For instance, members of the committee of independent fishermen operating on Lake Edward (located in the park) said about their impossibility to contact the current chief warden:


His entourage does have a policing vision, does not allow the population an opportunity to talk with him, we have no trust in his entourage. When de Merode comes to Vitshumbi, they do not allow us, the fishermen, to talk directly with him (Interview, Vitshumbi, June 2014).

Due to unequal access to education and information and communications technology, like the internet, the majority of the inhabitants of the Virunga area are also excluded from the online platforms and information flows generated by the park. For those who do have access to the internet, language forms a major obstacle to participation. Until 2015, the official website of the park, located in a country where the administrative language is French and which has four other official national languages, was only

available in English, a language few Congolese master. The social media accounts of the park similarly operate primarily in English, sometimes provoking reactions from Congolese asking in French why the park, which is a national patrimonial site, solely communicates its news in English (see Fig. 2).

**Virunga National Park**
March 20, 2015 · 🌐




Do you dream of one day becoming a Virunga National Park ranger? Well you can become a Virunga [Guardian](#) from anywhere you are in the world - simply adopt an area of 30 acres of land within the Mikeno Mountain Gorilla Sector and watch your contribution make a difference. [#FridayFact](#)




The Official Website of Virunga National Park - Adopt an Area




Virunga Guardians adopt a 30 acre area and personally protect Virunga's Mikeno Mountain Gorilla Sector. Let's stop poaching; become a [guardian](#)!


[VIRUNGA.ORG](#)

 Like  Comment  Share

 and 451 others [Top Comments](#) *

180 shares





comment park virunga qui se trouve au congo, un pay franconphone vous nous ecrivez les histoire en anglais?


Like · Reply ·  4 · March 20, 2015 at 8:00pm

Fig. 2. Comment on Facebook account of the Virunga park criticizing its communications in English.

The views of inhabitants are also rarely reflected in mainstream media reporting, or are represented in a highly selective manner. For instance, while the population hardly features in the movie *Virunga*, the few shots in which it is visible show overwhelming support for the park, which does not correspond to the lived experience of intense conflict (Vikanza, 2011). Moreover, whenever local (civilian) voices appear in media productions, their analysis is overshadowed by ‘white experts’ like de Merode, or by portrayals of the heroic actions of the paramilitary park guards.

One of the reasons for the distorted and minimal media reporting on the population is that many journalists go embedded with the park, which also organizes part of their movements (interview employee Virunga Alliance, Goma, June 2015). This implies they may not access some of the more insecure areas of the park, or if they do, will be accompanied by park guards, which impacts the gathered information. Furthermore, some journalists operate with financing provided by funders to the park and its socio-economic initiatives. For instance, US mega-philanthropist Howard G. Buffet, one of the main donors to the Virunga Alliance, provided a grant of \$5 million to the International Women’s Media Foundation earmarked for reporting on the Great Lakes Region, in order to “reshape the media narrative about the region” (IWMF, 2014a). This resulted, among others, in about a dozen articles on Virunga, largely praising the current park management and approach (IWMF, 2014b).

The audiences reading these articles, who are also the main targets of the park’s media campaign and fundraising efforts, often lack the possibilities to ground truth the presented analyses and narratives. As Igoe argues:

In the world of 360 marketing, in which products are no longer simply branded but woven into complex stories that are disseminated into as many media and locations as possible (. . .) it becomes extremely difficult to find other sources of information and alternative perspectives (2010: 390).

Due to the ongoing war situation in large parts of the park, visits outside the designated areas for tourism are prohibitive. Information from independent Congolese activist groups (implying they are not funded by the same donors sponsoring the park) is not readily accessible online, and is mostly in French. Thus, few people can assess the effects and effectiveness of the current militarized approach. From interviews with officials and diplomats held in Brussels, Goma, and Kigali, it emerged that this also applies to policymakers, who strongly draw on the information provided by the media and the park itself (see also Marijnen, forthcoming).

Concealing the ways in which a militarized approach fuels armed mobilization and conflict dynamics allows the park to claim that it contributes to ‘stabilization’ (interview with park authorities, Goma, June 2015). These claims are also reflected in representations of Virunga as an ‘island of stability’ that are diffused in media reports. As de Merode states in an interview: “indeed, if the war-ravaged Democratic Republic of Congo is ever to be stabilized, it will likely start from Virunga (. . .) Virunga has become an ‘island of stability’”. This is a park holding up a country, not the other way around” (Friedman, 2014). Thus, despite the fact that the Virunga area is currently one of the most unstable and dangerous zones in the eastern Congo, a discourse is adopted that is reminiscent of the narrative of ‘Stabilization through Conservation’ (StabilCon) analyzed by Duffy (2016: 245) in relation to Kenya. Through such discourse, the largely virtual good of ‘stabilization’ emerges as another ‘currency of conservation spectacle’ (Igoe et al., 2010: 494), in this case particularly

of the spectacle of militarized conservation.

In the vision of the park, stabilization is to be achieved not only through strict law-enforcement operations confronting armed groups and other offenders, but also through facilitating private investment schemes aiming to promote ‘development’ in the Virunga area and generate thousands of jobs. A key strategy to attract private investors is to build hydro-electricity plants around the park, which are financed by the Virunga Alliance. According to a partner within the Alliance: “Everything else has been tried in the Congo and it did not work. We want to bring development, conservation and stability through private sector involvement, it has not been tried before, but it is set up for success” (interview, Goma, June 2015). This quote echoes the ‘multiple-win’ rhetoric that is a hallmark of neoliberal conservation and that is a crucial way to build consensus among a range of diverse, but dominant actors (Büscher, 2013; Igoe and Brockington, 2007). In the case of Virunga, such consensus-building extends to the emphasis on private investment and market-based revenue-generation, which is also endorsed by public actors like donor governments. Consequently, these actors support militarized approaches believed to be necessary to enable market-based economic activities, for instance ecotourism (cf. Massé and Lunstrum, 2016). A good example are the policies of the EC, which has funded the military training of park rangers by Belgian former para-troopers to enable ecotourism, which involves the deployment of heavily armed park guards to accompany tourists in unsafe areas. As an EC policy document states:

By supporting infrastructure reconstruction and increasing security in the park, as well as putting in place a training programme for rangers and park managers, the EU has helped the resumption of tourism in the eastern part of the DRC. Tourism in the Virunga Park has produced millions of euros in revenue, and has already created job opportunities and boosted economic activity (European Commission, 2014).

This quote reflects how the EC’s financing of military training for park guards, which was funded by the ‘Instrument for Stability’, was justified by its contribution to security and the reestablishment of the tourist sector (Shifflette, 2009). However, due to the ongoing violence, tourism is currently only possible in a small part of the southern sector of the park, where according to a media report: “the militias are pushed to a safe distance by de Merode and his men” (Derkzen, 2012). While accessible to tourists, this area is not yet safe for adjacent populations, who frequent the roads through the park to engage in basic livelihoods provision, as banditry and kidnappings continue to be widespread (Human Rights Watch, 2015). At the same time, the fact that these roads are insecure is in part a result of the militarized approach pursued by the park, as the areas where it tries to push out armed groups often become highly unstable (Verweijen and Marijnen, 2016). Yet, due to the invisibility of (critical) local voices in the worldmaking projects surrounding green militarization in Virunga, such contradictory effects remain largely concealed. By producing virtual goods enabling or generative of marketization, like ‘stability’, such concealment is in turn essential for the further commodification not only of nature conservation but also of green militarization itself.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper has analyzed the discursive techniques that allow militarized approaches in

the Virunga National Park to emerge as a ‘taken for granted’ and ‘legitimate’ response to conservation amidst violent conflict. It has shown the continuities in some of these techniques from the colonial past to the colonial present, notably securitization and moral boundary-drawing grounded in often racialized colonial tropes and hierarchies, like imagery of the Congo as an uncivilized and barbaric place. Moreover, by portraying force as being controlled and deployed by ‘white experts’, confidence is instilled that it is ‘necessary’ and ‘just’. Despite these continuities, there are also transformations in the repertoire of discursive techniques (re)producing green militarization, as induced by the rise of neoliberal conservation. The latter has promoted the increasing spectacularization of militarized conservation, as reflected in media productions that feature spectacular warscapes, white saviors, and self-sacrificing (white/Western-trained) armed rangers as ‘true African heroes’. The figure of the ranger, in particular the dead ranger, is also at the forefront of ‘militarization by consumption’ as propelled by growing marketization, whereby individual donors are asked to directly fund militarized conservation efforts. Such efforts rely on decontextualized and depoliticized narratives featuring selective representations of violence, while concealing the (global) structures of inequality that allow for obscuring both the effects of green militarization on the ground and the asymmetric access to power, technology and knowledge that enables such obscuring. Moreover, these dominant narratives, and the difficulties to ground truth them, contribute to the emergence of ‘stabilization’ as a new currency of militarized conservation spectacle, promoting in turn a ‘multiple-win’ rhetoric that builds consensus among policymakers and donors, in particular on the desirability and effectiveness of market-based and militarized solutions.

Militarized conservation spectacle does not only drive and is driven by the growing commodification of nature conservation, it is also increasingly the object of commodification itself. The image of Virunga as a spectacular warscape, with armed park rangers and rebels depicted against the backdrop of lush nature, is used in for-profit economic activities, like various media productions. Moreover this imagery is employed in fundraising for the park, whether through charitable consumption and donations by individual supporters or financial contributions from institutional donors. Both types of funding are in part used to implement green militarization, sometimes with the aim of enabling private investment schemes like ecotourism. This shows how enhanced marketization, as both a discursive technique and a socio-economic process, is at once a product and productive of green militarization.

The trends of the spectacularization and marketization of green militarization are not limited to the context of Virunga but can also be observed in other settings in Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, many of the projects of the Thin Green Line Foundation, which supports armed park guards around the world, are in Africa. Portraying the rangers as ‘green martyrs’, its website states:

Every day, park rangers risk their lives to protect wildlife and habitats from poaching and other threats. Sadly, it’s estimated that over 1,000 park rangers have been killed in the line of duty over the past 10 years, 75% by commercial poachers and armed militia groups. Park rangers are generally under-equipped, underpaid, and often under-appreciated. We think they are heroes and work to provide them with the support they need to continue to protect threatened species around the world.¹²

¹² See: <https://www.thingreenline.org.au/story/> (last accessed 16 July 2016).

One of the drivers of the recent intensification of armed conservation is the growing salience of ‘tusks fund terror’ discourses, which establish a putative direct link between insurgent/terrorist activity and wildlife poaching (Duffy, 2014, 2016; White, 2014). The resulting securitization of conservation issues has intensified military interventions in the ‘war for biodiversity’ in Africa, including of Western/white military actors. For instance, in 2015, it was announced that the British army will send troops to Gabon to train ‘native trackers’ to improve their anti-poaching skills (UK Ministry of Defence, 2015). That same year, Vetpaw (Veterans Empowered to Protect African Wildlife), the movement of US army veterans ‘going to Africa’ to train anti poaching guards, sparked controversy through former army car mechanic Kinessa Johnson’s provocative statements like: “We’re going there to do some anti-poaching. Kill some bad guys and do some good” (Anderson, 2015). While the Tanzanian government eventually decided to expel Vetpaw from the country, the organization did draw widespread attention in old and new media. This reflects how militarized interventions in Africa are increasingly popularized and spectacularized via new media and TV programs like National Geographic’s *Warlords of Ivory* and Animal Planet’s *Battleground: Rhino Wars* (see also Büscher, 2016b). These productions exemplify how green militarization is increasingly an object of commodification, being capitalized upon for media productions and to attract donations. At the same time, the representations that feed into and are fed by these forms of commodification are profoundly scripted by colonial and racialized images, drawing on stereotypes of ‘white saviors’ and ‘African barbarism’. As such, new-style green militarization underscores how what Gregory (2016: 38) has described as “racialized apprehensions of nature” are fundamental to both the militarization of nature in Africa and the commodification of that militarization. This draws attention to the ways in which not only nature itself, but also representations of nature “are a modality that is intrinsic to the execution of military and paramilitary violence” (Gregory, 2016: 4).

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